

Six Essential Dialogical Virtues

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Why engage in Socratic conversation? Certainly, one seeks through Socratic conversation to encounter truth, goodness, and beauty. Beyond this encounter, however, effective Socratic conversation also brings about changes in the souls of those who practice it. Among its other advantages, engaging in Socratic conversation is an excellent way to encourage the cultivation of what may be called “dialogical virtues.”¹ These virtues arise when one applies oneself consciously and deliberately to the demanding practice of Socratic conversation. Another way of putting it is to say that through engaging in Socratic conversation, we place ourselves in an good position to develop not only desirable character traits but also habits of thought and speech that will serve us well in all of our pursuits as human beings seeking to know ourselves, the cosmos, and its Creator. As with other acquired virtues and habits, these things develop neither spontaneously nor without considerable effort. If we do not have them in mind beforehand and actively attempt to foster them while engaged in Socratic conversation, we should have little confidence that these character traits and habits of thought and speech will come to be in us with the depth and richness they could have, had we intentionally pursued them. What follows is a brief description of six essential dialogical virtues.

I. Wisdom

In a previous post I outlined the differences between intellectual and moral virtues. Socratic conversation at its best should include a cultivation of both. Among the

¹ For lack of a better term, I call such virtues *dialogical* rather than *dialectical* (since *dialectical* has various technical meanings that would likely confuse the reader) or *Socratic conversational virtues* (inelegant, to say the least, and hardly preferable to the much simpler *dialogical virtues*).



intellectual virtues, wisdom has preeminence. Speaking of this preeminence, Hugh of St. Victor opens his *Didascalicon*, a work on the study of reading, with the following reflections on wisdom:

Of all things to be sought, the first is that Wisdom in which the Form of the Perfect Good stands fixed. Wisdom illuminates man so that he may recognize himself; for man was like all the other animals when he did not understand that he had been created of a higher order than they. But his immortal mind, illuminated by Wisdom, beholds its own principle and recognizes how unfitting it is for it to seek anything outside itself when what it is in itself can be enough for it. It is written on the tripod of Apollo: γνῶθι σεαυτόν, that is, “Know thyself,” for surely, if man had not forgotten his origin, he would recognize that everything subject to change is nothing (1.1).²

From this rich passage, two items are of greatest interest for our purposes. First, in referring to the “Form of the Perfect Good,” Hugh is borrowing a phrase from Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, wherein the phrase alludes to Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. Thus, we see that Hugh (and Boethius before him) follows Augustine in grounding man’s knowledge of himself in a knowledge of God, and specifically of Christ, the Incarnate Word. Putting this together with the accounts of wisdom we find in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, we see that this Wisdom, the “first” of “all things to be sought,” is a knowledge of God as the first Cause and final end of all things, and He has made Himself known through the Incarnation. Thus, when man attains wisdom, he comes to see himself and the created order in light of God, Who created, orders, and sustains all things in existence, and Who redeems fallen mankind in order to reestablish loving communion with Him. This knowledge of God and of

² Hugh of St. Victor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, translated with an introduction and notes by Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), preface. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations of *Didascalicon* are from this edition.



oneself and all else in relation to God is the ultimate intellectual goal of all Socratic conversation pursued under the light of the Christian faith.³ Second, note well how Hugh appropriates and elevates the Delphic injunction to “Know thyself” by understanding it in light of the Incarnation.

II. Humility and Charity—The Beginning and End of Socratic Conversation

In terms of the moral virtues, humility is the foundation of Socratic conversation and is vital to its ongoing flourishing. In general, the Greeks had no clear conception of humility as a virtue. And yet, anyone familiar with Plato’s dialogues is aware of something like this virtue operating in the words and deeds of Plato’s greatest characters. We need only remind ourselves of the character Timaeus in the dialogue named after him to see a clear instance of this.⁴ Following the Judeo-Christian tradition, Augustine was convinced that humility was in a sense the foundation of all learning. Hugh, sometimes called the “second Augustine,” explains humility as the foundation of all learning: “Now the beginning of discipline is humility. Although the lessons of humility are many, the three which follow are of especial importance for the student: first, that he hold no knowledge and no writing in contempt; second, that he blush to learn from no man; and third, that when he has attained learning himself, he not look down upon everyone else” (3.13).⁵

Let us consider each of these lessons of humility as they pertain to the sort of teaching and learning made possible through Socratic conversation. First, the one

³ At this point, we could proceed to give accounts of understanding and knowledge as intellectual virtues. Instead of doing so, we will move on to the moral (and theological) virtues that enliven and perfect Socratic conversation.

⁴ “Wherefore, Socrates, if in our treatment of a great host of matters regarding the Gods and the generation of the Universe we prove unable to give accounts that are always in all respects self-consistent and perfectly exact, [do not be] surprised; rather we should be content if we can furnish accounts that are inferior to none in likelihood, remembering that both I who speak and you who judge are but human creatures, so that it becomes us to accept the likely [story] of these matters and forbear to search beyond it” (*Timaeus* 29c/d).

⁵ *Didascalicon*, pp. 94-95.



engaged in Socratic conversation must be humble enough to “hold no knowledge and no writing in contempt.” If students begin ill-disposed to learn from a reading or other great work, it should not be at all surprising that they will get little to nothing out of their study. Second, especially while actually participating in Socratic conversation, it is crucial that the student “blush to learn from no man”—that is, he must be willing to learn from not only the text(s) under consideration, but also from his peers. Finally, once he has acquired learning, the one who not only learns the principles and practice of Socratic conversation but who remains true to them will “not look down upon everyone else.” Thus, the snobbish elitism that we discussed in a previous post involves a decided departure from humility, the ground of Socratic conversation and, as it were, its constant guide and guard.

If humility is the beginning of Socratic conversation, what sets it on the right path and keeps it true to itself, charity—i.e., love—is its lifeblood and ultimate end. Throughout the Western tradition, authors have drawn out the implications of philosophy as the “love of wisdom.” What starts as a Socratic quest for wisdom leads us to the God Who is Wisdom, Truth, and Love. This God, in turn, calls us to share in His divine life by loving Him and all other things for His sake. Since this is so, Socratic conversation pursued under the light of the Christian faith is consciously and unabashedly conducted in charity. Rather than seeing the Socratic quest for wisdom as somehow at odds with the Christian pursuit of love, great authors of philosophical dialogues such as Augustine, Boethius, and Thomas More, invite us to see the latter as fulfilling, completing, and perfecting the former. Indeed, Socratic conversation only reaches its full potential when infused with divine love, which elevates it and enables those who practice it to make headway toward union with the God Who is Love.

III. Other Indispensable Dialogical Virtues—Courage, Patience, Kindness



While many additional dialogical virtues could be mentioned, we will conclude this essay with a brief account of some of the most indispensable among them—courage, patience, and kindness.

That courage is a vital dialogical virtue should not surprise us. Throughout Plato's Socratic dialogues, Socrates embodies courage in the pursuit of the truth and exhorts others to follow his example. It takes true courage to expose oneself to the winnowing effect of Socratic conversation. As harvested grain used to be thrown into the air so that the light chaff would blow away, leaving the weighty kernels, so in Socratic conversation our ideas are constantly being winnowed by the give-and-take of the dialectical exchange—only what has logical weight remains. To defend a position always involves the possibility that if we are in error, our position will be revealed as inadequate. Nevertheless, we are not our positions; and provided we can have the humility and courage required to revise our positions, we have nothing to lose and much to gain from being proven wrong. Another way in which courage is required for effective Socratic conversation has to do with the sheer difficulty of the task. Engaging in such conversations is arduous work; it is all too easy to get tired or to become fainthearted in the pursuit, especially when we see the interest or engagement of others around us flagging. Even so, it is at these very moments that mustering the courage to continue is most crucial.

Patience, or its absence, can make or break a Socratic conversation. Given that everyone must remain alert and actively pursue the truth together in order for the conversation to go where it must, it is not hard to see how tempers may flare or participants may get impatient with one another. Such hotheadedness is counterproductive, as it clouds our judgment, thereby making it more difficult for us to find the truth. Furthermore, since the very mode of progress in Socratic conversation is slow, stepwise, and often "circular," patience helps all involved to stay the course and get the most out of the conversation. Although not a showy virtue, patience constantly



reminds us of our fallen human nature and of our own individual imperfections so that we may respond with understanding to the imperfections of others. As its etymology implies, patience is a kind of suffering; and the more we are able to “suffer” the limitations and imperfections of others in Socratic conversation, the more we will be able to see with them beyond all our shortcomings.

Of all the virtues we have discussed, kindness is arguably the least understood and the most underestimated—especially in Socratic conversation. In a culture where being kind is often equated with being nice, and being nice is nearly a vacuous notion, it shouldn’t surprise us that kindness is held in such slight regard. In reality, however, kindness is a powerful virtue. It looks to the needs of others and meets them, at times without being asked (and yet also without being annoying or officious). Kindness in human relations bears a resemblance to the providential care that God shows for all creatures. It studies a situation, sees a need, and supplies for the need in a straightforward and unpretentious way. When tempers begin to flare or when morale starts to wane, it may share a peaceful word or make a harmless jest in order to defuse the rising tension or to encourage others to press on in good cheer. Where a true spirit of kindness pervades a Socratic conversation, all are at ease and take delight in the common challenge before them. When a kind person corrects you in Socratic conversation, you experience the presence of charity gently directing you toward what is true, good, and beautiful.

